

Institute Colloquium



by

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Title : **A Nomad Called Thief: Social Stereotypes
and Violence in India**

Day & Date: Friday, March 12, 2010

Time: 4.00 p.m.

Venue: Institute Auditorium

All are Invited.

Abstract: The British colonial rule in India was not only a political and economic enterprise, it was also an experiment in restructuring a complex society. For the first three centuries of the colonial contact, beginning with the arrival of the East India Company at Surat in 1600 to the establishment of the Asiatic Society in Bengal towards the end of the eighteenth century, the colonial imagination had great difficulties in understanding the complex weave of the Indian society. Out of these difficulties arose many misconceptions and myths about communities and social conventions. At times these were comical as was the idea that India is a country of snake charmers and magicians. But in many instances the wrong reading of the society resulted in untold human misery. The story of the communities known as 'denotified' is without doubt the most mind boggling tale of inhuman collapse of compassion.

During the 1830s, the colonial government appointed Sleeman to prepare a list of instances of assaults on wayfarers in central India. He took to this task with an amazing devotion and produced a voluminous list of violent episodes. The list would not have amounted to much had it not been for the turn of events during the 1857 in central India. In the wake of the battles fought and lost by the Indian states, all isolated and potential groups of soldiers, and even those who were likely to be in the supply chain for them, came to be seen as candidates for the Sleeman –list. This list became the basis of the 1871 Criminal Tribes Act. The infamous CTA asked for forced 'isolation' and 'reform' of the communities listed. These included coin makers, entertainers, petty merchants, peasants, wandering groups, nomadic communities, long distance traders and many others.

The CTA required creation of 'settlements' as reformatories. The Settlements required 'strict procedures'. These procedures kept becoming increasingly inhuman. Forced labour became the daily fate of the inmates. The CTA of 1871 went through several revisions, every revision bringing in new forms of 'punishment' for being born within the listed communities. The last of the CTA was passed in 1924. By then a total of 191 communities had been brought under its purview. The total population of all these communities 'Notified' under the successive CTAs is, at present, nearly sixty million.

The lecture will discuss social stereotyping in India and the violence and atrocities arising out of it. The main theme of the lecture will be the colonial experience and its impact on our understanding of the social complexities in our country.